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INDIA: CHANGING ATTITUDES ON INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

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Summary

Sikh terrorism is prompting India to adopt a more constructive attitude toward international terrorism issues and to seek cooperation from Western countries harboring Sikhs. Prime Minister Gandhi's recent public call for the release of the TWA hostages in Beirut contrasts sharply with India's traditional ambivalence toward hijackings and similar acts of violence. With its chief concern narrowly focused on the Sikhs, India is likely to offer only limited cooperation against general terrorism in the near term.

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Faced with a serious threat from Sikh extremists, India is beginning to take international terrorism more seriously. Recent statements by Prime Minister Gandhi suggest that India is moving toward closer cooperation with the United States and its allies on terrorism issues. During the past month, Gandhi publicly:

- Called for a global agreement on measures to combat terrorism.
- Condemned the TWA hijacking in Beirut and appealed to the hijackers to release their hostages on humanitarian grounds.

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] of the Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis. Information as of 19 July 1985 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, South Asia Division [redacted]

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- Announced that the Indian Government would not succumb to terrorist pressure and that severe action would be taken against terrorists in India.

In addition, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs has publicly urged the government to take "strong and uncompromising steps against all forms of terrorism." [REDACTED]

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These statements contrast sharply with India's traditional passivity toward international terrorism. In the past, New Delhi's reactions have ranged from silence to vaguely-worded statements of disapproval, partly from a sense that terrorism elsewhere was none of India's business, but also out of concern for India's friendships in the Arab world--especially with the Palestinians. India also has been reluctant to antagonize the Islamic fundamentalist regime in Iran, fearing that Tehran would retaliate by attempting to radicalize India's largely quiescent Muslim population. For example:

- India privately condemned Iran's 1979 seizure of the US Embassy hostages but turned aside US pressure to join official statements and did nothing to help ease the crisis.
- New Delhi reacted to the bombing of our Embassy in Beirut in April 1983 by suggesting that Washington's refusal to recognize Palestinian rights of self-determination was a key source of US troubles in the Middle East.
- India has commented publicly on only a handful of the many hundreds of terrorist incidents that have occurred in recent years, according to press reports. [REDACTED]

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India has even abetted terrorist acts in neighboring countries by providing sanctuary, financing, and training for Tamil militants seeking a separate state in Sri Lanka, and by periodically supporting Al-Zulfiqar terrorists aiming to overthrow Pakistan's military regime. Officially, New Delhi has rationalized this support by defining these groups as "freedom fighters" rather than "terrorists." [REDACTED]

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The record under Rajiv's stewardship, however, suggests he may be less comfortable with Indian support of such groups. New Delhi's backing of Al-Zulfiqar now appears dormant and Indian security forces have reined in the Tamil guerrillas, if only as part of India's support for the current Sri Lankan political negotiations. [REDACTED]

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India as Victim

New Delhi's attitudes began to change only after India started experiencing terrorism first hand, following the army's bloody June 1984 attack on Sikh extremists holed up in the Amritsar Golden Temple--the Sikh religion's holiest shrine. Since then, India has been jolted by a number of violent incidents, including:

- The hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane to Dubai by Sikh extremists in August 1984.
- The assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by Sikh members of her bodyguard in October 1984 and the resulting Hindu backlash that claimed several thousand lives from both communities.
- A series of bombs in New Delhi and three northern states in May 1985 that claimed over 80 lives and injured hundreds.
- Numerous assassination attempts on Sikh and Hindu leaders in Punjab that have resulted in some deaths. [REDACTED]

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A major factor contributing to New Delhi's raised consciousness about terrorism is the very real threat to Rajiv. Sikh extremists who applauded his mother's murder have also called for his death, and many Indian and US observers believe he is certain to be the victim of an assassination attempt sooner or later. India's internal security services are preoccupied with protecting his life and those of his wife and children. The severity of this concern has been underscored by the construction of a new home for the Gandhis designed exclusively for protective purposes, the withdrawal of his children from their schools, and the increased precautionary planning before Rajiv travels, whether in India or abroad. [REDACTED]

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India also has taken a number of broader steps to curb Sikh-sponsored violence within the country--including a draconian antiterrorism law, improved airport and VIP security measures, and the establishment of new counterintelligence units targeted against Sikhs. [REDACTED]

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The International Dimension

A number of recent events indicate that Sikh extremists are increasingly targeting Indian interests and personnel overseas, where funds, arms, and training are more readily available and where they can gain greater publicity for their cause. At least two Sikh extremist groups have claimed credit for the dramatic crash last month of an Air India 747 at sea. New Delhi strongly suspects the disaster was caused by a bomb planted by Sikh extremists in Canada. [REDACTED]

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New Delhi has long maintained that it could contain the Sikh threat but for extremists abroad. [REDACTED]

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Mounting incidents by foreign-based Sikh terrorists as well as concern for Gandhi's safety while traveling abroad have forced New Delhi to recognize the need for more international cooperation against terrorism. So far, however, the focus of India's efforts and activities has been on seeking closer cooperation from foreign governments--particularly the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States--in thwarting the Sikh threat to Indian interests. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Gandhi wants Indian security officials to cooperate with the United States on this issue. [REDACTED]

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Limits to Cooperation

We believe New Delhi recognizes that cooperation is a two-way street and that the United States will expect India to provide assistance in return. In the near term, however, Indian cooperation probably will focus narrowly on piecemeal and largely tactical arrangements with the United States concerning Sikh activities in both countries. New Delhi can also be expected to push for more formal quadripartite cooperation between itself, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. [REDACTED]

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Nonetheless, India has appreciated and been encouraged by US statements of support for its unity and integrity in the wake of Sikh unrest in the Punjab, and Rajiv himself appears to be generally more attuned to the need for democracies to act in concert against terrorism. US assistance to India's counter-terrorism efforts over the past year has already had some effect in persuading New Delhi that the problem is global in scope and that India should work jointly with other countries. Indian security officials in New Delhi have expressed keen interest in receiving anti-terrorism training in the United States, notably in explosives detection and disposal and in forgery detection. [REDACTED]

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At this juncture, India's contribution to Western efforts to fashion an international response to terrorism appears to be a matter of some debate among Gandhi and his senior advisers, with no clear consensus yet apparent. We believe India will be reticent to engage in anti-terrorist initiatives that its

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friends--including the USSR--would view as too close to US positions; it will prefer multinational settings for its public efforts. Moreover, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs' sanctimonious response to the US-sponsored boycott of Beirut International Airport suggests New Delhi's entrenched bureaucracy does not yet reflect the Prime Minister's more open-minded approach. [REDACTED]

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Challenges for the United States

Gandhi's own perceptions of the terrorist problem appear to extend well beyond his government's narrower focus on the Sikhs. His interest in terrorism also adds a new dimension for strengthening Indo-US ties. [REDACTED]

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The more actively India becomes involved in international cooperation on terrorism, the more likely counter-terrorism will receive support from other developing countries and the less opportunity New Delhi will have to backslide into its traditional ambivalence toward the problem. Closer cooperation with the United States should also help strengthen India's resolve to continue dealing with its own terrorist menace within a democratic framework. [REDACTED]

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SUBJECT: India: Changing Attitudes on International
Terrorism [REDACTED]

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- 1 - C/DDO/NEA [REDACTED]
- 1 - C/DDO/NE [REDACTED]
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DDI/NESA/SO/S [REDACTED] (29 Jul 85)

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SUBJECT: India: Changing Attitudes on International
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SUBJECT: India: Changing Attitudes on International
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